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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the state of children's literature by tracing some of the side effects of nineteenth-century English children's literature. During their early histories, the British colonies, including America, were economically unable to produce their own children's books. Reading materials were imported from the home country, and, likewise, the ideological forces of imperialist England accompanied them. The dynamics of nineteenth-century capitalism compelled literary expression in America and England to take diverse directions. At the end of the twentieth century, capitalist pressures are enclosing the publishing worlds of America and England within the same whirlpool of market demand and creation. The mass culture engendered in this literary world results in the "imperialist" domination of the reading space, and therefore what is and what is not being published for the multinational market becomes a vital area of consideration. Restriction and segregation are arising from commercial reasons and are in danger of enclosing the literary experiences of children and channelling their reading into particular cultural knowledge. As with America, South African children's literature written in English reflects the ideologies of imperialist England. Not only do cultural tensions remain in the substance of the narrative, the action, characterization, and plot, but also in the ways that the narrative is constructed. In Australia, there are also problems with the mismatch between the natural narrative of the culture and the required narrative forms of the dominant literacy, which is again Eurocentric. Thus, in the twentieth century, English children's literature continues to be a radical influence. (AEF)

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Children's Literature-Comparatively Reading. Thinking About the Pink Bits: A Consideration of the Influence of English Children's Literature

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The approach adopted in this paper is discursive and comparative, moving beyond the isolated analysis of texts, which of necessity formulates the underpinning of such study, in an attempt to begin to understand the relationships between Children's Literature and various cultures world wide. The notions of literary/cultural dialectics are proposed here in discussion form rather than as a finished thesis.

Lisa Paul, Debby Thacker, and Peter Hunt have variously identified and discussed children's literature as being positioned "on the margins" of society and academic study; in many ways, as they have proved, this is true. The purpose of this discussion paper, however, is to contemplate literature for children, and the study of such, as becoming the center of focus at certain points of cultural development by tracing some of the side effects of nineteenth-century English children's literature.

Initially I would like to draw your attention to the following statement by Matthew Arnold, a nineteenth century man of letters:

> Everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures.

Arnold's thinking was determined by nineteenth century patriarchy which looked to the complete integrated self, and thereby subjectively made sense of the other. In one way the quotation is ideal in a discussion on comparative literature, in another sense it becomes indicative of the influence of English children's literature as a blanket spread across the Empire, muffling the indigenous literatures, for that which was valued was judged against the central standard of English literature.

Since the time of Henry VIII, England has been a colonial power as the Irish can testify; during the nineteenth-century this political activity escalated for we became most actively and obviously a world dominating imperialist force. Wherever the world map has been colored pink on the march of colonization, so English Children's Literature appeared. During their early histories the colonies, which also for a considerable period of time you will remember, included America, were economically unable to produce their own books for children. Reading materials were imported from the home country, the seat of industrial power in the 19th century, and therefore the ideological forces derived from imperialist England were also carried along. Historical accounts of the literary developments in America, Australia, Ireland and South Africa, for example, support this position. What I am interested at this time, in is not so much the impact of what I shall call "literary imperialism," but rather the side effects, the reactive literary movement in the colony in relation to the English influence. This reaction, I would contend, is particular in each case to the cultural and physical environments and draws into the circle of focus those forces which drive onward to separate the colony from England, through the literary consciousness.

Consider our American cousins. Initially they shared our Puritan literary roots in terms of children's literature, not unexpected for a colony strongly peopled by Puritan dissidents, until the work of Samuel Griswold Goodrich, (1793- 1860) who as the narrator Peter Parley described great travelogues combined with his own version of American history. America, need I say, is a big country which was being travelled and settled, therefore, it is logical that these considerations should feature in the literary consciousness dominating writing for children. The need to write a history is also instrumental for it is a way of documenting the consciousness, the identity of the culture. Irish children's literature is currently displaying a similar phenomenon in the work of Siobhan Parkinson and Marita Conlon Mackenna, for example, who have engaged in a revisionist approach to history and cultural identity through literature in books such as Siobhan's *Amelia* and Marita's *Under the Hawthorn Tree*.

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But to return to mid-nineteenth century America and to compare the literature of that period with what was happening in England where the great expansion of fantasy had begun with the work of Edward Lear, Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll. In America the central concerns were not so clearly defined as fantastic, but essentially contributing to a dream, the American dream; the success of the individual, the dream of rags to riches. Horatio Alger in stories such as *Ragged Dick* the outline of which was written in 1864, typifies the belief that any American could succeed in this land of opportunity. To quote:

> "I hope my lad," Mr. Whitney said, "you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free country poverty is no bar to a man's advancement."

There had been actual cases of such phenonemal success in the lives of men such as Andrew Carnegie who had emigrated poverty stricken from Scotland to a new beginning motivated by hard work and self help. In England at this time the decade of nonsense had begun: 1862, Kingsley's *Water Babies:* 1865 *Alice in Wonderland* and Edward Lear's *Nonsense Songs* 1870. Whereas Horatio Alger's work contributed to fantasy through realism, and that was a realism with a very aware capitalist base, Kingsley, Carroll and Lear challenged and subverted the capitalist center of the world--the 1851 Great Exhibition was testament to this status--by making nonsense of Victorian life. Kingsley, for example, finally assigns his capitalist chimney sweep, Master Grimes, to an asylum; Carroll makes fun of industrialized Victorian England, the railways, the overly obsessive preoccupation with time and bureaucracy--think of the Mad Hatter's tea party, for example, where they are timetabled to move on regardless of need. Whilst Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat" can be read as a subversive challenge to imperialism:

> The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea
> In a beautiful peagreen boat
> The took some honey and plenty of money,
> Wrapped up in a five pound note

They sail away for the statutory year and a day, to gain freedom, and then land on the island to marry and dance in the moonlight. At least they rule the island with love.....

Interestingly both Kingsley and Alger were engaged in the humanitarian tradition, combating the atrocities of industrialism which were visited upon young boys. Alger fought bravely against the padrone system which was a contract labor system, effectively buying young boys as street musicians and sending them out to beg.

> "The boys were treated brutally, many of them dying because of privation and disease. In 1871 Alger depicted their plight in "Phil, the Fiddler," and began a public campaign to free them, during which time his life was threatened many times.... Finally a particularly brutal case was only brought to justice by the efforts of Alger

whose energies brought the case to the notice of The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. They took the case to the courts, and in 1874, as a result of the uproar caused by a child having to be defended by a society concerned with animals, the first state legislation was passed for the prevention of cruelty to children.

Consideration of the time span covering the major work of these writers raises questions concerning the stability of both nations during this period. In America it was the time of the Civil war, 1861-1865, whereas England was not engaged in turmoil to such an extent. For example, The London Underground was opened in 1863 as was Broadmoor asylum for the criminally insane, and in 1864, the first all-English golf club. A period of engineering achievement, social ills, but also striving to create a better society. I would contend that a culture in turmoil is not tolerant to nonsense or humor. (This point will be raised later in reference to South Africa.) For it was not until 1884 in America that Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, the tall tale challenge to American society; bordering on the dreamlike fantasies of Kingsley and Carroll which were also underpinned by social criticism.

As briefly discussed the dynamics of 19th century capitalism compelled the literary expression in America and England to take diverse directions, now, at the end of the 20th century it is as if the circle is closing and capitalist pressures are enclosing the publishing worlds of America and England within the same whirlpool of market demand and creation which threatens to suck literary considerations into an economic void created by the multinational international marketplace.

The mass culture engendered in this literary world results in, as it were, the "imperialist" domination of the reading space, and therefore what is, and also what is not being published for the multinational market becomes a vital area of consideration. Historical books, for example, outside of a popular and mythic range, are becoming taboo, for it is argued that the reader has to have knowledge of the context to understand the work. Marita Conlon Mackenna's *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, an historical novel which deals with the period of the Great Potato Famine in Ireland, was marketed in the UK for it falls within the stereotypical expectations of "Irishness", whereas Siobhan Parkinson's far more engaging *Amelia* which surprisingly takes the Quakers of Dublin, not Catholics or Protestants as its social group, has not appealed to the UK distribution outlets.

Restriction and segregation are arising from commercial reasons and are therefore in danger of enclosing the literary experiences of children and channelling their reading into particular cultural knowledges. I am not suggesting that this is a conscious "plot" but rather a result of pragmatism. However, literature has not always been so self-ignorant in other societies, for example, South Africa where black writing was suppressed during apartheid.

As with America, albeit much later, literature for children in South Africa was for a considerable period of time imported from England. Much of the early South African writing for children in English, emanating from the early years of this century, (there is a small Afrikaans tradition) smacks of Henty-like maleness; the adventurer confronting the veldt accompanied by his trusty dog, thus echoing the values of the adventurers who explored and settled the Africa. Those stories are time locked within values of Englishness transported to the colonies. The landscape differs, but the ideology reflects that corner of a foreign field which is forever England, which has, until recently, tended to remain time frozen in the comfortable colonialism of the 1950s. Under apartheid The Ravan Press continued to strive to publish and encourage black writers. The narratives reflect the mythic consciousness of suppression, for cultural identity is retained and nurtured through myth.

Post-Apartheid there is a swelling of realist fiction, in the exploration and demonstration of both the conjunction of cultures, black and white, and the African experience per se. In some of the texts there is a movement toward an honesty where it is recognized that the bitter inheritance of such division cannot be wiped from the page in but a matter of months, and that the cultural tensions remain.

Not only do cultural tensions remain in the substance of the narrative, the action, characterization, plot etc. but also in the very ways that the narrative is constructed. The African tradition is essentially an oral tradition. The pattern of listening to these stories is one where the audience move in and out of the group as they wish. In a Eurocentric situation--the static audience listens while the story continues with a beginning, a middle and an end. The expectation is that we sit as a group until the story is finished, the frame closed. These narrative structures are imbibed from the early experiences of socialization into story listening. Current research in South Africa by Dr.Myrna Schnell has proven that the African understanding of narrative is different from the Eurocentric. The implications of this are very far reaching. How do we educate but through narrative? We tell the story of a subject whether it be mathematics or English literature. I am not making claims of preeminence for the Eurocentric, but rather need to point out that there are differences. Margaret Meek is currently researching the narrative structures embedded in nonfiction for children. Narrative constructs a "logic of the imagination," to quote T. S. Eliot. The situation in South Africa is at the stage of investigation in one arena, combined with efforts from the publishing world to enable African writers to become effective in absorbing African narrative into the Eurocentric literary field. At present this is being done through the conscious use of myth, the notion of the journey or quest, and the reinterpretation of symbolism for the Eurocentric reader. What I mean by this is that it is easy to misread the signified because we employ a Eurocentric mode of deconstruction which is culturally embedded in how we interpret those signifiers; for example, a cave to us is a source of mystery, threat, the potential home of dragons and demons; in African culture it is a place

of security which equates with the Greek concept of ekos, the home, the fireplace. Works such as Carolyn Parker's *Witchwoman on the Hogsback* are endeavoring to close those gaps, although ironically Carolyn Parker is European! Literary gaps are attempting to be drawn together in other ways, for example, the picture book is striving to find an African identity.

This Easter saw the opening of the first exhibition of South African illustrators. The African picture book is comparatively young, and much of the work is realist based which is only recently beginning to show the freedoms of humor, fantasy, wiftyness, and surrealist subversion with which we are familiar in the work of Anthony Browne, and Raymond Briggs, for example. At the recent Children's Literature Conference in Pretoria, (Easter 1995) there was a concentrated debate on the lack of humor in South African children's literature. It would seem that there is, in the narrative little space for humor, as yet. Humor is appearing in visual form, the work of Marjoram van Heerden, for example, for there is the freedom of laughter in the open text of visual readings. The illustration is freed from the burden of language where there are eleven national languages before one contemplates the different dialects. Illustration allows the reader to formulate their own narrative beyond the problems of formalized language. The African oral tradition also offers more than language for there is a strong basis of movement, sound, music and energy rather than the pictorial, the visual, as is the case with the Australian Aboriginal tradition.

Currently in Australia, Dr.Maureen Nimon is working with Aboriginal storytellers whose basis for imaginative expression is through the Dreamtime artistic creations. Again there are problems with what could be termed, "narrative disjunction" the mismatch between the natural narrative of the culture and the required narrative forms of the dominant literacy, which is again Eurocentric. The texts which are trying to construct an Aboriginal narrative for the reader, rather than the listener, or initiated viewer, combine a multiplicity of techniques. So there are various forms of annotations, using balloons, or narrative blocks etc. to add narrative to the Dreamtime paintings in order to communicate the interpretation of the art, where, for example, the very patterning employed to depict the trees has a semiotic signification. One of the problems is in defining, describing and critiquing this multiple literary form.

Academics have articulated their understanding of this work in terms such as "post-modernism", but as Maureen Nimon points out, this is essentially problematic for the signification of the Aboriginal culture becomes suffocated by English literary terms--for it is a form which is of itself, the "other." In the 19th century there was overt physical imperialism in the 20th century we have intellectual imperialism. The Eurocentric academic literary discourse silences the indigenous voice by absorbing it into the language of the dominant culture.

Interestingly such searching for linguistic identity is happening through children's literature, itself a marginalized area, for it was predominantly at the margins of literature, in publishing for children that the "Dreamtime" stories found a literary place.

In some areas of Australian, and South African Children's Literature there is an identifiable dynamism in the relationship between myth/fantasy and culture as the constraints of colonialism and political control are being broken--one may draw comparison here with the late 19th century Celtic literary revival in adult Irish literature, and the 20th century movements in Irish children's literature where myth equates with the freedom of the imagination through which a silenced colonial people may find identity. However, unfortunately children's literature, albeit working in the world of the imagination, may not always be a liberating medium, for if one considers the literature which until very recently has been produced for children in the Czech Republic, then a repressive regime thrives on the mythical nature of fairy tale a form of cultural retardation through the feudalistic patriarchy of the fairy tale. Most Czech children's literature is the republishing of fairy tales, not rewriting as currently witnessed in America and the UK, thereby constraining the reader within the social and moral structures embedded in the stories.

Ironically in this 20th century post-imperialist era English children's literature still continues to be a radical influence, not only in obvious ways through the multinational publishing companies, but also less so as follows. In the Czech Republic the British Council have innovatory language courses to fast-track teachers who need to move from teaching in Russian as a first language to English. These courses are most effective, and take English books for children as their texts--so the world still blushes pink.....if more gently so than of old.....

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